

Russo Wines - 2008 Harvest Report

Many of our wine-loving friends wanted to know more about the production of wine, so the 2007 harvest report recorded our first fun-filled steps in this new venture.

After lots of positive feedback about the report, we decided to do it again. This report covers some of our latest learning experiences and developments at Russo Wines.



Selecting the best grapes is a slow process – we start a sunrise.

This year has been an exciting one so far. In February we bottled our maiden vintage from last year, and we will soon released it to the market. The 2008 harvest was processed in our own cellar (and is currently maturing quietly in the barrels). We are also converting some of our Cabernet Sauvignon vines to Malbec and Petit Verdot.

At the moment, the vineyard includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. From these cultivars we produce a classic, single vineyard Bordeaux blend in one of the best grape areas in South Africa.

Barrels, blending, bottling and labelling

Our 2007 wine spent 12 months in oak barrels, of which approximately one-third were new ones. Winemakers generally use 1/3 new barrels, 1/3 second-fill (used once before) and 1/3 third-fill or older. A new 225 litre barrel (300 bottles) costs around R7,000 – one of the major costs driving up the price of good wine.

A new barrel releases more tannins into the wine than an older one, so you need to strive for balance in the final product. Depending on exactly what you want to produce, you have to decide, based on the quality of the wines in every bin, which bin's wine goes into which barrel.

After barrel maturation, blending the different wines from the different barrels was an intricate process, involving many intense, yet quite enjoyable, tastings and debates between Terèsa, Henk and Riaan Oosthuizen, our winemaker-friend and advisor.



The first ever Russo bottles enter the mobile bottling plant – history in the making!

We bottled the wine on 28 February this year, using a mobile bottling plant. Although the process seemed quite high-tech, we still needed about 15 helpers – folding boxes, packing the bottles on the production line, removing it again afterwards, packing it into the boxes and transporting the boxes to our cellar. We ended up with 4,515 bottles, all bottled in less than 3 hours.

Designing the label was the next major exercise. We wanted a classic label to compliment a serious wine, but deciding on the graphics, colours and wording of the label was almost as difficult as actually making the contents of the bottle.

For the last two years, we studied the label on every bottle of wine we could find. Once we knew more or less what we wanted, we approached Henk's sister, Linda Smal, and her partner Eddie Haumann. They are graphic designers with an outstanding reputation in wine circles.

Eddie, Linda and their team came up with several brilliant designs. We took four months to narrow the selection down to three, with the help of all the friends who visited us during this period. Terèsa would not allow them to leave before expressing an opinion (and having to defend it too!). We eventually decided on the final design – it is classic and elegant, exactly like the wine itself.



Okay, so what does it taste like and when can we drink it?

Imagine spending several hundreds of hours, including late nights and weekends, working towards an end product without actually knowing what the final result will be like. You do all the right things at the right time, but there are factors simply beyond your control. All you can do, is pray. And so we did!

Then you take that very first sniff and sip of your own wine and it is fantastic – better than you ever imagined. However, you realise this is your own wine and it should taste like that! You then hope that others will like it too, but gradually, as more and more people taste and enjoy it, your confidence grows.

It really is a great wine and we are extremely proud of it!

The wine is elegant and smooth with an alcohol level of 13,5%. Other descriptions include: medium-bodied, hints of chocolate, black berries, dried fruit and mushroom, earthy and complex, new aromas after a few minutes in the glass.

We are currently waiting for the labels from the printers and should be able to release the wine to the market by the end of October. If you would like to avoid the rush that we are hoping for by reserving a box (6 bottles) or two, you are most welcome to do so by emailing Terèsa at teresa@russowines.co.za.

Our own cellar

Last year, we rented space at a small “communal” cellar a few kilometers away from our vineyard. Although we enjoyed interacting with several other boutique winemakers, the travelling (several times a day) just became too much for us.

So we set about converting one of our outbuildings to a small wine cellar. Originally constructed by the previous owner to house hundreds of chinchillas (yes, those long-haired rabbit-like creatures), the layout of the building was ideal for our purposes. In December last year we raised the walls, re-roofed and isolated the building and laid a special floor. As these things go, the final touches were added just days before the harvest – fortunately it started two weeks later than last year!



Celebrating the first harvest day at our own cellar!

The cellar’s maximum production capacity is about 15 tons; much less than the 40 tons of grapes the vineyard can yield. However, to ensure that we only use the best grapes, we limit the crop by cutting out most of the grapes long before they ripen, improving the quality of the remaining ones. This also means that we do not harvest more grapes than we can reasonably pay attention to – every bunch is personally selected by hand before crushing starts. Our total harvest this year was 12,5 tons.

Situated right next to the vineyard, the grapes can be brought to the cellar immediately after harvesting for de-stemming and crushing, which helps keep the temperature down. The cellar is also close enough to the house for those very necessary (but dreaded) 2 am visits during the fermentation period.

Terèsa, who has now taken over the role of winemaker with all her usual enthusiasm, decided that all the trips to the laboratory in Stellenbosch meant too much time away from her wine, and now she proudly conducts most of the tests in her small, but well-equipped, laboratory in the cellar.



When we say “handcrafted” we mean it! Monica and Teresa hard at work on the Petit Verdot, before destemming and crushing.

Conversion to Malbec

During a visit to Argentina in 2006 we were introduced to high-quality Malbec and we really enjoyed it. Some classic Bordeaux blends include this cultivar and we therefore decided to convert some of our Cabernet Sauvignon vines into Malbec. While we’re at it, we also decided to increase our Petit Verdot stock (which really thrives here) from 6% to 15% of the vineyard, using the same process.

It is less expensive and quicker (but requiring very specialised skills) to convert existing vines than to plant new ones. The existing vines are actually cut off about 65cm from ground level and the new cultivar is then grafted to the new shoots, so you basically end up with a Malbec vine with Cabernet Sauvignon roots.

This is a very interesting undertaking and we are fortunate that the best technology and craftsmanship are available right here in the Western Cape.

Toys for boys

A tractor is essential on a farm, but on a small one like ours it is used for only about 60 hours per year and therefore no great investment.

Our brother-in-law, Wynand du Toit, tells the story about his late father who regularly spent his Saturdays trying to keep the old Vaaljapie tractor running. One fine morning, after again spending several hours with little success, he quietly got into his car and drove off, still in his overalls. He returned about two hours later, now behind the wheel of a brand-new Lamborghini tractor, followed by an overjoyed salesman!

Our 1968 red Massey-Ferguson was great, but ultimately it had to make way for new technology. After much research, it was replaced by a blue Landini Mistral with lots of gears, different speeds, permanent four-wheel drive, power steering, a cab with aircon (yes, it can be very hot out there!) etc, etc. Henk really enjoys driving it, as any male who reads this will understand. It would certainly be hard to find a worse, yet more enjoyable investment.



So, you'd like to see how we do it?

From speaking to several of our friends, we know that many of you are interested in the practical aspects of harvesting and wine-making. Generally, it is impossible to visit a production cellar during the period when these activities are actually happening – it is such an intense time that winemakers simply cannot leave whatever they are doing to explain what is going on to visitors.

We therefore decided that, during the 2009 harvest season, we will set aside a day when you could visit us for some real-time wine production education. You're welcome to help us – we'll show you what to do. This should be towards the end of February / beginning of March. If you are interested, send an e-mail to teresa@russowines.co.za and we will contact you once the harvest starts.